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## SURVIVALS AND THE HISTORICAL METHOD

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When the average American ethnologist hears the word "survival," he crosses himself four or five times and mutters some cabalistic phrase, such as "historical method," designed to ward off the noisome influence. For the spread of rationalistic principles over the globe alarms him as the ridiculous goodness of his parishioners struck terror into the soul of gentle Alice Brown's father confessor; when everyone has divested himself of traditional beliefs, what will then become of the professional ethnologist, whose bread and butter depends on the study of accepted faiths, institutions, and usages? The simplest preventive is to create or to perpetuate a body of ethnological superstition or, to put it more mildly, of ethnological folklore.

What is there to inflame the American ethnologist's passion in the doctrine of survivals? Why is an ethnologist damned to perdition for accepting the survivalist position? Why is it necessary to lift a colleague from the bottomless pit of iniquity to a limbo of comparative respectability by assuring the world that, while he may have yielded allegiance to some European theory, he *of course* has not followed the ignorant and immoral foreigner in his views on survivals? The emotional value that seems to be attached to this matter is such that a few remarks on the logic of the survival theory seem in order.

"A custom is regarded as a survival," writes Rivers, "if its nature cannot be explained by its present utility but only becomes intelligible through its past history."<sup>1</sup> Or, to put it on a less exclusively utilitarian basis, a survival is an element of culture that has become isolated from its organic context and can be understood only by being restored to its proper place. As soon as this definition is grasped, the reality of survivals is illustrated by a thousand

<sup>1</sup> Rivers, "Survival in Sociology," *Sociological Review*, 1913, pp. 293-305.

instances from our own civilization. Our mode of electing a president when the original motive of having electors independent of the popular will has disappeared is one example. The retention of methods of military drill in no way appropriate for modern warfare is another. Our heritage of mediaeval legalism forms a third; and so on. As for cruder cultures, the innumerable cases in which natives cling to an old pattern for a tool when a new kind of material, such as copper superseding stone, demands a new form constitute an important group of survivals.

If, then, survivals are matters of direct observation, whence the wrath of the ethnological orthodoxy militant? The reason is sheer ignorance of survivalist logic. For this logic is not one whit inferior to the approved method of the historical school or, for that matter, to that of scientific investigation generally.

In order to test this assertion, let us see what the vaunted historical method in ethnology amounts to. In dealing with primitive civilizations we are of course very rarely in the fortunate position of having the support of authentic historical records. Accordingly, almost every statement as to chronological sequence or tribal connections is not based on an immediate datum, but is a matter of hypothesis and inference. If some element of culture is found among two neighboring peoples and we desire to determine from which of them it has been transmitted to the other, we unconsciously employ a number of common-sense criteria.

For example, we may contend that the trait has been borrowed by people. Assuming the two peoples are A and B, people A borrowed because their language has no indigenous designation for the loan-concept. We place some reliance on this argument because we know from a number of instances whose history is established that words *are* borrowed with things—to mention only tea and kindergartens as the first random illustrations that offer themselves. Another type of argument is based on the intensity of a cultural feature, the assumption being that as water cannot rise above its source so an element of culture will be most highly developed in its place of origin. This, also, is not a purely a priori contention, for we can readily support it by empirical data. Hand-kissing, which flourishes in oriental Europe, dwindles in Viennese

society to an act of courtesy toward ladies or a piece of lip-service to social superiors; Athenian art did not retain its pristine vigor when transplanted to Rome; and so forth. That this latter mode of argument virtually merges in the survival theory hardly requires mention.

Again, the strictly historical ethnologist will use established ethnographical knowledge to guide, not only his inferences from reported data, but the very course of investigation in the field. Being saner in his practice than in his theory, he completely abandons his favorite doctrine of the complete uniqueness of historical events. If he did not, his mode of preparing for an expedition would savor of the ridiculous. If cultures are subject to an infinitely powerful trend toward individualization, why study the culture of the Santee Dakota when going to the Yankton branch of the same Indian tribe? *Ex hypothesi* the civilization of Australia or of Mars would be as much to the point. It is a healthy instinct that preserves the ethnologist from such absurdity. He brings the Yankton under the wider concept "Dakota" and argues that there is at least a strong probability that the essential features found in one division will be duplicated in the other. The Santee culture, which is supposed to be known, may be defined as a complex of traits *a, b, c, . . . .*; our historian assumes that because the Yankton at one time were certainly one with the Santee, i.e., represented the same complex, there is a relatively strong likelihood that a particular element will still be common to both, and his field work yields the experimental corroboration or refutation of this working hypothesis.

Now, in what respect does the method of survival differ from that of the ethnological historian? Let us take for illustration the oft-cited case of the avunculate. In the Banks Islands of Melanesia the maternal uncle and his nephew stand to each other in an altogether distinctive relationship. A man treats his mother's brother with much more respect than his father. On the other hand, he may take any of his maternal uncle's property, marries his maternal uncle's widow, and is introduced into the men's clubhouse through his uncle's sponsorship. These features are associated with the system of mother-kin by which a man must belong

to the same clan as his maternal uncle and cannot belong to the same clan as his father or his father's brother.

The rationale of the avunculate lies in the accentuation of the maternal line of descent characteristic of the Banks Islands organization. On the other hand, it is not only obvious, but ridiculous, that the avunculate should coexist with a patrilineal scheme of organization, for it seems a contradiction in terms that a society which stresses the father's line should accord more than paternal (or filial) privileges to the maternal uncle (or sister's son). When, therefore, we discover the avunculate among patrilineal Melanesians, such as the Torres Straits Islanders, it is an entirely legitimate, nay, an almost inevitable, inference that this feature did not originate as part of their social scheme, but is the remnant of a matrilineal society which once existed in these same islands or elsewhere.

But the avunculate is also well developed on the Pacific coast of North America. Among the Tlingit, for example, property was inherited, not by the son, but by the sister's son, and spirits descended in one family from uncle to nephew. On the other hand, the nephew was obliged to render gratuitous service to his mother's brother in boyhood. Further, the uncle's widow was married by the sister's son.<sup>1</sup> The resemblance to Melanesian conditions is not so marked in other American areas, but unmistakable elements of the avunculate complex crop up here and there. Thus, among the Hopi of Arizona ceremonial prerogatives descend from uncle to sister's son; with the Pawnee the maternal uncle enjoyed a peculiar position of authority; and among the Choctaw children inherited property, not from the father, but from a brother or mother's brother. Can it be sheer chance that these are all tribes with a matrilineal social system? And, if so, can it be only a curious accident that has produced the startling resemblance between the Melanesian and North American conditions?

What is the logical aspect of these phenomena? A complex of features *a*, to wit, the avunculate, is frequently found in con-

<sup>1</sup> Krause, *Die Tlinkit Indianer*, p. 231; Swanton, "Social Condition, Beliefs and Linguistic Relationship of the Tlingit Indians," *26th Ann. Rept. Bureau American Ethnology*, p. 466.

junction with another feature, *b*, i.e., mother-kins. The coincidence, moreover, is not a purely empirical one, but one of which the rationale is at once manifest. When, therefore, we encounter element *a* in conjunction, not with *b*, but with *d*, we automatically infer that this latter association has superseded the not merely usual but logically consistent connection of *a* and *b*. The validity of this conclusion will become the more assured the more definitely we can point to a complex *a+b* in a neighboring or related tribe.

Thus, among the Hottentot there is a peculiarly close relationship between mother's brother and uterine nephew, involving the privilege of appropriating each other's property, but we have yet to learn of matrilineal groups in this tribe.<sup>1</sup> A more typical form of the avunculate, however, occurs among another South African people, the patrilineal Thonga. Here the sister's son throughout his life is the object of special care on his uncle's part. For example, the maternal uncle sacrifices himself on behalf of his nephew and officiates in the funeral ceremonies. Property is, indeed, now inherited by the sons of the deceased, yet the uterine nephews demand and receive a share, thereby formally waiving more pretentious claims. Finally, as in the Banks Islands and on the North Pacific coast, the nephew may inherit a maternal uncle's widow.<sup>2</sup> That so many features of the avunculate should coexist with a rule of paternal descent remains an unintelligible puzzle unless we restore them to their natural context by assuming that they were once associated with a matrilineal scheme. If we are permitted to argue that because the Santee Dakota practice a certain custom it is likely to occur among the Yankton Dakota, we are also permitted to argue by the universally accepted canons of scientific logic that the presence of one of two constantly associated traits indicates the former association with the complementary member of the pair. In its application to the case in hand the argument derives support from the fact that related South African tribes, such as the Herero, actually are organized in social groups based on maternal descent.

Here, however, is where some survivalists become the legitimate objects of hostile criticism. Not content with holding that

<sup>1</sup> L. Schultze, *Aus Namaland und Kalahari* (Jena, 1907), p. 303.

<sup>2</sup> H. Junod, *The Life of a South African Tribe* (Neuchatel, 1912), I, 228, 248, 253 f.

the avunculate in the midst of a patrilineal society is an anomaly and must once have been associated with a maternal system, they assume further that such a system preceded the paternal organization *in the tribe where the latter now occurs*. This is an entirely unwarranted conclusion. We know that diffusion of cultural features has taken place to a very considerable extent in the evolution of civilization; and we know also that in the course of this process single elements of an association of traits may become isolated from the rest. Hence, we need not assume that the Thonga—let alone the Hottentot—were once matrilineally organized because of the presence of the avunculate. The avunculate may merely be that part of the original complex which was transmitted to these peoples; not they, but the tribe from which they ultimately borrowed the feature in question, must have had a maternal clan organization.

We have thus gained a position from which it is possible to harmonize the apparently contradictory points of view of the survivalist and the historian. We need not assume that cultures, independently of one another, have an indefinite number of times produced the same association of traits. To be sure, there is no *logical* difficulty about such a hypothesis; but the empirical evidence of historical connection between different tribes forces us to limit the number of independently developed resemblances. On the other hand, there is only one alternative to the hypothesis that a feature like the avunculate has arisen from, or as a part of, like social conditions in remote areas, and that is the extreme form of diffusionism advocated by men like Graebner and Elliot Smith. If the human mind is incapable of duplicating its own productions, every cultural similarity must of course be the result of borrowing, while, on the other hand, such dissemination certainly gives a satisfactory account of the observed similarity. But the same intuitive sense of fitness that has preserved the historical ethnologist from postulating in practice an infinitely powerful centrifugal trend of culture proves his prophylactic against the doctrine that distant regions between which the means of communication are next to inconceivable were once linked and enjoyed a lively exchange of cultural possessions. Now, what are the logical implications of

this instinctive view? Clearly that there *is* an organic, not a merely chance, relation between certain cultural elements. It is sheer cowardice or hypertrophied conservatism to talk grandiosely of the unique character of historical events in the face of such definite and far-reaching resemblances as those between the avunculate of Melanesia and North America. If a fortuitous combination of incidents produced these similarities, then I am willing to believe that a fortuitous combination of incidents causes the identity in the rate of acceleration of falling bodies. The alternative is simply: either diffusion or independent evolution due to like causes. But, if the ethnologist decides in favor of independent development, he can no longer afford to sneer at the doctrine of survivals. Rejection of the omnipotence of diffusion has for its inevitable counterpart a partial acceptance of the view that cultural traits may be functionally related.